

# A Genre-based Approach to Preparing for IELTS and TOEFL Essay Writing Tasks

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## Abstract

Genre-based approaches to the teaching of writing have been employed in various English language learning contexts, especially in the area of academic writing. This paper proposes the adoption of a genre-based framework to help learners prepare for the essay writing sections of the IELTS and TOEFL tests. Recent test results indicate that the writing sections of these tests are the most problematic. A genre-based teaching methodology is proposed that should not only help prepare learners to meet their most immediate needs in achieving satisfactory scores in such tests, but also empower them to achieve various goals in the future.

Key words: genre analysis, genre-based teaching, writing, IELTS, TOEFL.

## Introduction

Genre-based approaches to language teaching have become increasingly influential in recent years, particularly in the area of academic writing. A vast body of genre-based research exists on the different sections of research articles (Holmes, 1997; Peacock, 2002; Swales, 1981, 1990) and dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1986, 1994). While this work has benefited graduate students and academics who need to write research articles and dissertations to achieve success in their chosen fields, it seems that the needs of the many novice and potential members of English language universities have not been satisfactorily considered to date (Johns, 2008; Samraj, 2004).

This paper proposes that one way to address this situation could be to adopt a genre-based approach to the teaching of basic academic writing. It will focus on a popular means of access to English language universities for L2 speakers: proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Specifically, this paper will address a section of the tests that has been very problematic for test-takers: the argumentative essay.

First, definitions of the key concepts of *genre* and *discourse community* will be presented. Following that is a discussion of the problems that many L2 English learners have with the writing sections of the IELTS and TOEFL tests and with essay writing in general. A review of research on the writing sections of IELTS and TOEFL tests follows. After that, the merits of different approaches to genre-based teaching are considered. Finally, a genre-based methodology for teaching writing

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that could help English language learners meet both their immediate and future needs is presented.

### Definitions: genre and discourse community

Before considering genre-based approaches to language teaching we need to have an understanding of the key concepts of *genre* and *discourse community*. The concept of genre as it is used in language teaching is far from fixed. Bhatia (2001:65-66) defines genre as “the media through which members of professional or academic communities communicate with each other”. An alternative definition is offered by Martin (2001:155), who defines genre as “a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture”. However, Painter (2001:168) suggests that as some genres, for example, supermarket shopping, involve very little language use, for the language teacher “it may be most useful to think of a genre as a culturally specific text-type which results from using spoken and/or written language to (help) accomplish something”.

Although the concept of *discourse community* has been criticised for being, as Hyland (2003) puts it, “too structuralist, static, and deterministic”, it is also, he adds, “central to genre views of writing as it is a powerful metaphor joining writers, texts and readers in a particular discursive space” (2003:23). One way to view a discourse community is to consider it a group of people within a disciplinary field or area of common interest whose members use the genres they “possess” to communicate with each other (Swales, 1990), which regulates membership through its expectations of “what is permissible within the genre or genres that it uses” (Dudley-Evans, 1994:220).

### The problem

The need for more effective approaches to IELTS and TOEFL essay writing preparation has come to light through recent test results as well as feedback from learners. Test-taker performance data indicates that the writing section of the IELTS (Academic) test is the most challenging part of the test. In 2010 the writing section was the lowest scoring component of IELTS tests for both male and female candidates (Table 1). Scores for the IELTS test are reported on a nine-band scale with a score of 1 indicating a non-user of English and a score of 9 indicating an expert user.

**Table 1**

*Mean band scores for female and male candidates in IELTS tests in 2010 (Academic)*

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Female	6.1	6.1	5.6	5.9	6
Male	5.9	5.9	5.4	5.8	5.8

(IELTS Worldwide, 2011)

When the mean band scores are broken down into examinees' first language the problem becomes even clearer, with the mean band scores for writing being especially low for candidates from

Asian countries (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Mean band scores for writing in IELTS tests in 2010 (Academic) by first language*

First language	Japanese	Korean	Chinese	Arabic	Punjabi	Thai
Score	5.3	5.3	5.3	4.9	5.2	5.3

(IELTS Worldwide, 2011)

With a score of 6.5 considered by many the necessary minimum for academic study (Blundell, 2007; Graddol, 2006) results such as these clearly indicate a problem that needs to be addressed.

Feedback from overseas students who were successful in gaining entry to Australian universities also identified essay writing as being problematic, specifically due to having had “no previous contact with the genre” (Blundell, 2007:16). A possible factor in this lack of generic awareness for students from countries such as Japan and Korea has been identified by Lin (2006), who notes that the influence of genre-based approaches in EFL in East Asia is still limited.

### **Previous research on IELTS and TOEFL essay writing tasks**

A substantial literature exists on the essay writing sections of the IELTS and TOEFL tests. Research has been published on the features of highly rated compositions in the TOEFL (Jarvis et al., 2003), the role of argument in IELTS writing (Coffin, 2004) and the washback of IELTS tests on the education systems and societies in which they operate (Green, 2006, 2007). In addition, Raimes (1990) explored causes for concern with the writing section of the TOEFL and Moore and Morton (2005) compared IELTS essay writing and university writing.

Despite this body of research, the suitability of a genre-based approach to the teaching of writing the text-types typically employed in the IELTS and TOEFL has not been adequately assessed. This is somewhat surprising, given the high stakes involved, the problem that many candidates clearly have with the writing sections of these tests, and the knowledge that genre-based approaches have proven successful in improving writing in many other contexts. The rest of this paper will explore how a genre-based approach could help learners prepare to write the text-types typically seen in IELTS and TOEFL tests.

### **Addressing the problem: which way forward?**

A compelling rationale for adopting a genre-based framework for the teaching of writing put forward by Lin “is that it facilitates clear links to the students’ purposes for writing beyond the classroom” (2006:230). A first step however, is to consider which approach to teaching genre will best serve learners’ needs within their learning context.

Although practitioners such as Flowerdew (2002) see merit in adopting a prescriptive approach in certain settings, an overly prescriptive approach should be avoided for several

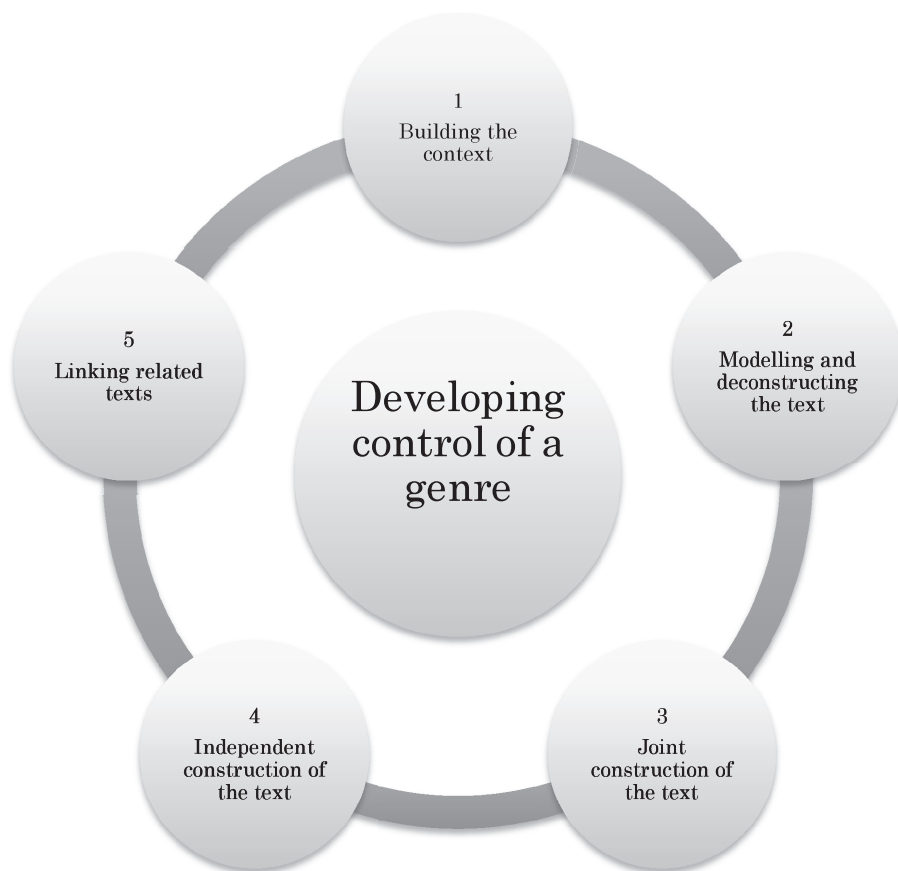
reasons. First, while genres involve regularities they are essentially, in the words of Bhatia (2001), “dynamic constructs” - constantly developing and changing because the societies and communities they function in are also constantly developing and changing. A strongly prescriptive approach that fails to recognise this and stifles individual creativity perhaps misunderstands genre's essence. While a prescriptive approach might be beneficial in the short-term, it may also result in knowledge that is soon outdated. In addition, if learners are not given some autonomy or the necessary analytical tools they will not know how to do things for themselves when confronted with unfamiliar situations in the future. As Bazerman argues, “if we provide some analytical vocabulary to reflect on how genres relate to the dynamics of situations, [learners] will be able to observe and think about new situations with some sophistication and strategic awareness” (as cited in So, 2005:79).

This is particularly relevant in countries such as Japan and Korea, where there has been a strong emphasis on grammatical form in writing instruction. In Korea, for example, as Kim and Kim (2005:71) point out, “most students have been taught grammatical features separate from the context and failed to find a close relationship between grammatical form and function” thus “their knowledge of grammar was not carried over to their ability to write”. Therefore, an approach which enables learners to develop not only textual awareness, but also metacognitive thinking so that they recognise the roles played by language structures in generating meaning is needed to prepare them for the various situations and genres they will encounter.

### **Empowering learners in the EFL writing classroom: a genre-based approach**

An approach that could develop the above abilities as well as allowing the individual and unique voices of L2 learners to be heard is one based on the teaching and learning cycle developed by Feez and Joyce (1998). It is a text-based methodology designed for L2 English learners and is constructed around the different phases of classroom interaction. The theoretical underpinning of this model is provided by a Vygotskyian emphasis on the interactive collaboration between teacher and learner, with the teacher “scaffolding” or supporting learners as they move towards their potential level of performance (Hyland, 2003). The model is represented in Figure 1.

The first two phases of *building the context* and *modelling and deconstructing the text* is where the scaffolding provided by the teacher is at its strongest. In the first phase the teacher introduces the social context of the text, designing and using activities that allow learners to engage with the context (for example, brainstorming, reading relevant material or cross-cultural comparisons). The second phase focuses on modelling and deconstructing the text. For the genres considered in this paper, this could involve the teacher introducing successful IELTS or TOEFL essays or other expositions and drawing attention to their organisational and linguistic features. It is here that the learner would learn to identify and gain some practice using some of the specific lexico-grammatical features of texts in the target genre. For example, using a model text the teacher could point out the role played by connectives in generating meaning in the text. At this stage a genre analysis framework, such as the one presented in the Appendix, could be introduced.



**Figure 1.** A Genre Teaching Learning Cycle. Adapted from “Heritage and Innovation in Second Language Education” by S. Feez, 2002, *Genre in the Classroom: Multiple Perspectives*, p. 65.

After learning how to use the framework learners could then, with the support of their teacher, carry out their own analyses of the contextual and linguistic features of exemplar texts.

In the next two phases the learners' responsibility increases as their increasing knowledge enables the teacher to weaken the scaffolding provided in the first two stages. In the *joint construction of the text* phase, learners could work together in groups constructing an essay from the target genre with teacher guidance. During the next phase - the *independent construction of the text* - the scaffolding is removed completely. It is here that learners work independently at constructing their own texts. For construction of IELTS or TOEFL essay text-types learners could be asked to respond to examples of typical question prompts from the tests or similar teacher-formulated questions. After successful independent construction of the text, links can then be made to related text-types to enable learners to use what they have learned. This would enable them to see the uses, effectiveness, and similarities and differences of texts in various other contexts.

## Conclusion

This paper has proposed adopting a genre-based teaching methodology to help learners prepare to write the types of essays seen in IELTS and TOEFL tests. However, while acknowledging the gatekeeping function of these tests, an approach to genre which reflects the role of English today as the preferred language of international communication is needed. The genre teaching and learning cycle presented here can be used to meet this need without depriving learners of opportunities to improve their knowledge of and competency in using various genres.

For learners hoping to participate in English-speaking discourse communities it is essential to be able to use a variety of genres. In the context considered in this paper the stakes of this are very high as failure to achieve a satisfactory IELTS or TOEFL test score could have serious life consequences. The genre-based approach presented here could help learners to achieve such crucial, immediate goals as well as providing them with the tools necessary to succeed in the future. Arming learners with such tools is a vital step in helping them to successfully use the genres needed to achieve their aims in the various social contexts they will encounter beyond the classroom.

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## Appendix

## Example genre analysis framework

Contextual analysis	
1. Genre type and subtypes	What is the name of the genre of which the text is an exemplar? Are there any subtypes or subsets in this genre?
2. Context of situation	
a. Mode	What is the channel of communication?
b. Tenor	What roles may be required of the writer and its readers in this genre? Do they have equal status and how is their affect and contact?
c. Field	What subject matter is the text about?
3. Purpose	What are the communicative purposes of the text? How are they achieved? How are they related to the stages of the text and their rhetorical functions?
4. Institutional practice/ discourse community	In what institution is this kind of text typically produced? What constraints and obligations does this discourse community impose on writers and readers? Do the production and reading processes influence its schematic structure and language?
5. Sociocultural context	Are there any social, historical or cultural factors that make the text appear the way it is?
Linguistic analysis	
1. Schematic structure	In what way/order are the ideas organised in the text? How is it related to its social/ institutional practice and purpose?
2. Linguistic features	What are the lexico-grammatical features for realising the metafunctions of language: experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings? How are they related to context?
3. Intertextual analysis	Is there anything drawn from other texts? Is information attributed to sources and how? What shared knowledge is expected of readers? Is there any interdiscursivity? Has the text drawn upon other genres?

*Note.* Adapted from “From analysis to pedagogic applications: using newspaper genres to write school genres,” by B.P.C. So, 2008, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, p. 70.

